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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 COTONOU 001107

SIPDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y-- ADDEE

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

FOR AF A/S FRAZER

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [EWWT](#) [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [CASC](#) [BN](#)
SUBJECT: SCENE SETTER FOR GULF OF GUINEA MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE,
COTONOU, BENIN

REF: COTONOU 972

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1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Post welcomes your participation in the Government of Benin (GOB)-ACSS hosted Gulf of Guinea Ministerial Conference on Maritime Security in Cotonou, November 13-14, 2006. Your visit highlights USG support for security and safety initiatives in the Gulf of Guinea. The conference takes place under the aegis of Benin's new pro-US President Boni Yayi, elected in widely acclaimed free, fair and transparent March 2006 presidential election, whose success many here attribute to the USG role.

2. (SBU) Your presence will reinforce existing strong bilateral relations as demonstrated by the new Millenium Challenge Compact (MCC) that entered into force on October 9 and ongoing USAID, Peace Corps, and DOD programs. Benin is also on track for the Women's Justice and Empowerment Initiative (WJEI), receptive to the President's Malaria Initiative (PMI), and a viable candidate for the World Bank's Fast Track Program in education. You also will meet with the President and Foreign Affairs and Defense Ministers and participate in a roundtable with Finance, Commerce and Agriculture Ministers on trade and investment issues. This is a much-appreciated opportunity to meet and greet Mission staff. Outreach on avian flu to Amcits continues, and the Mission is seeking a site for construction of a new embassy. There is little anti-Americanism, and the USG is very popular with the GOB, press, and general population. However, petty crime is a problem. END SUMMARY.

KEY ISSUES: MAKING THE DEMOCRATIC DIVIDEND PAY

3. (SBU) Benin President Boni Yayi assumed office with a strong mandate, having won 75 percent of the run-off vote. Despite Benin's political stability, economic growth over the past several years has been disappointing. The country has few natural advantages or resources to spur growth or endow it with geo-political strategic importance. It is only Benin's democratic tradition that has qualified Benin to feature on almost every list of beneficiaries for various aid programs such as Millennium Challenge, AGOA, HIPC debt relief, President Bush's Women's Justice and Empowerment Initiative, the EU's program of direct budget support, and the World Bank's Education Fast-Track Initiative.

¶4. (SBU) This "democratic dividend" is vital for Benin, but can only spur real economic growth if it is combined with improved economic governance. Botched privatizations of Benin's cotton and petroleum parastatals, Benin's largest export and import items, respectively, combined with difficult world market conditions for both products, have weighed heavily on Benin's economy over the past three years. Endemic corruption and inefficiencies in managing crucial infrastructure such as the Port of Cotonou, also negatively affect growth.

MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE ACCOUNT, USAID AND PEACE CORPS

¶5. (SBU) The United States is perfectly positioned to work with the new government on these issues and participates in senior policy and program discussions among heads of diplomatic missions and agencies in a monthly donor coordination meeting. The next meeting will take place on November 15.

¶6. (SBU) In February 2006, Benin signed an MCA Compact, which entered into force on October 6. President Yayi presided over an October 9 ceremony to mark the occasion. He underscored his Government's commitment to maintaining Benin's eligibility for the Compact program, notably by addressing the problem of endemic corruption. The Compact includes a series of strategic investments designed to address key physical and institutional constraints to increasing investment and private sector activity in four program areas: access to Justice, financial services, markets (which is predominately to improve the functioning of the Port of Cotonou), and land. The USD 307.3 million program is expected to impact 2.5 million Beninese, lifting 250,000 of them out of poverty within five years.

¶7. (SBU) USAID and Peace Corps will continue their programs in key social sectors. USAID supports a primary health care designed to increase access to and improve the quality of health care. Our health assistance promotes childhood vaccinations, polio eradication, family planning, malaria control, and HIV/AIDS information and

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treatment. The USAID education program focuses on primary education and provides support for Benin's primary education reform, teacher training, improved school supervision, and increased enrollment and retention of girls in primary school. (See para 21 below.)

¶8. (SBU) Peace Corps will continue its programs focused on key social and economic sectors such as education, health, environment, small business and information technology respectively. Over 100 Volunteers are working within the local communities countrywide in those programs. Peace Corps has enjoyed a successful relationship with the GOB since 1968. This year Peace Corps celebrates its 45th Anniversary worldwide of which 38 years have been in the Republic of Benin without interruption.

REGIONAL STABILITY AND MILITARY COOPERATION

¶9. (SBU) Entry into force in 2005 of an Article 98 agreement (which the GOB prefers to call a "non-surrender" agreement) has permitted us to significantly increase the tempo of military training and cooperation with the Beninese forces. Our IMET program restarted in FY06 and is focused on English-language training in addition to other general courses. The GOB also has expressed interest in nominating candidates for attendance at one or more of the war colleges. Unfortunately to date, Benin's IMET budget beyond FY08 was eliminated (Note: We have not yet shared this information with the GOB).

¶10. (SBU) Although a small country, Benin is a beneficiary of the Africa Contingency Operations Training Assistance (ACOTA) program and makes an important contribution to regional stability both through its example and commitments. Benin currently has over 1,200 peacekeeping troops deployed in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC) and in Cote d'Ivoire (UNOCI), as well as military and police observers in Darfur and Haiti. To sustain these contributions, the GOB would require USG support.

¶11. (SBU) The Beninese Naval Forces struggle to conduct operations and, at present, consist of two Boston Whalers, one of which is inoperative. Two patrol boats have not been seaworthy in recent years, and are moored at the Port of Cotonou. This is one reason Benin would be an attractive prospect for FMF funding. The last U.S. vessel to call was the USS ELROD, which visited Cotonou six weeks ago.

¶12. (SBU) The French and Belgians are actively cooperating with the Beninese military, and a military delegation from China visited Benin in August of this year. The French also have approximately 20 officers who are seconded to the FAB and wear Beninese military uniforms.

¶13. (SBU) Your visit comes in the wake of the successful execution of the Benin portion of MEDFLAG '06, the USEUCOM-sponsored ECOWAS military exercise that was held September 4-15. It involved the participation of nearly 60 U.S. military medical personnel and received broad press coverage (reftel).

AMCIT SERVICES

¶14. (U) The consular section has been conducting outreach, most recently at an October 25th American Citizen Community meeting, to remind Americans of the need to take basic precautions against Avian Influenza. Avian Influenza outbreaks have occurred in three of Benin's four neighboring countries making it a probable site for future outbreaks. All birds tested for H5N1 in Benin have been negative, but the GOB's surveillance system is constrained by limited resources and we are urging all Americans to remain cautious. The consular section is also working on improving the current warden system to make it more effective in the event of an emergency. Post also is actively searching for an appropriate site to build a new embassy as approved.

REGIONAL SECURITY

¶15. (U) Benin is rated HIGH for crime and MEDIUM for transnational terrorism. The community in general is affected most by street crime in all parts of Benin. There has been a slight increase in carjackings carried out by Beninese gangs over the past two years.

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There are no known terrorist organizations present in Benin, and the Beninese Government supports the United States in the War Against Terrorism. Embassy Benin enjoys a good working relationship with the local Police and Gendarmes. Nigerian-style 419 fraud is prevalent in Benin as well as the presence of counterfeit US currency and counterfeit Franc CFA.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BENIN

¶16. (U) Benin's status as one of the most peaceful and democratic countries in Africa is a real achievement. In fact, Benin was the first African country to suffer from a military coup in the post-colonial era, and from 1963 to 1972 Benin saw more coups and changes of government than any other African state. From 1972 to 1989, under Mathieu Kerekou's "revolutionary" leadership, Benin lived under a Marxist regime that quickly became unsustainable with the end of the Cold War.

¶17. (U) Benin became a trailblazer in a more positive sense in 1990 when it was one of the first African countries to undergo a democratic transition. A new Constitution was adopted in December 1990, and, in elections in February 1991, Kerekou was defeated and peacefully stepped aside for new President Nicephore Soglo. But in 1996 Kerekou resumed office after defeating Soglo in democratic elections, and he won re-election in 2001 in a vote marred by allegations of fraud.

¶18. (SBU) In this year's March presidential election, Kerekou was barred from running by the Constitution's presidential term limit,

as well as a maximum age of 70. On April 6, 2006, Kerekou became the first African leader in history to constitutionally leave office twice as a result of democratic elections.

BIO NOTE ON PRESIDENT BONI YAYI

¶19. (SBU) Boni Yayi, a Paris-educated economist who had never held elected office and who had no political party affiliation, skillfully crafted a campaign projecting himself as both an economically literate technocrat, and the embodiment of change for Benin. By voting for him in both rounds of the 2006 election, Beninese voters opted decisively for change.

¶20. (SBU) President Yayi views the United States as a key partner for his new government. An evangelical Christian, he emphasizes that he shares "American values" such as the importance of good governance and the promotion of investment and economic growth. Both issues feature prominently in his government's program.

APPENDIX

¶21. (SBU) USAID programs focus on health and education. Working with other donors, health programs (FY 2006 USG funding is USD 7.9 million) address malaria and childhood illnesses, safe pregnancy, prevention of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections. USAID also will jointly inaugurate a radio communication network in northern Benin, installed with UNICEF assistance and will enable communities in remote areas to easily contact the better staffed and equipped district hospitals for help in managing medical emergencies, especially obstetric cases. Benin has received USD 25.5 million in total from the Global fund for programs in HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. Benin's USD 4.8 million application for tuberculosis funds was just approved in round 6 while its USD 40 million proposal for malaria was not approved.

(Note: Hold pending a White House announcement: Benin has been included among countries which will receive funds under the malaria presidential initiative. This could bring in as much as USD 10 million additional annual funds to combat this illness, a key contributor to mortality and morbidity in Benin.)

USAID's education program (USD 4.4 million in FY 2006) focuses on primary education including teacher training, promotion of girls' education, community involvement in planning and management of education services, teacher training institutions, and improving the ability of the education sector to respond to the threat of an expanding HIV epidemic. Benin participates in the Africa Education

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Initiative which in addition to a focus on improving teacher skills and providing textbooks, also includes scholarships for girls under the Ambassadors Girls Scholarship program which benefits about 1,000 girls each year. A ceremony to award scholarships for this year took place on November 9.

USAID also addresses social services and protection for especially vulnerable populations, including:

Women's Legal Rights Initiative (WLR). Benin is one of several countries in Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe benefiting from WLR with a focus in Benin on promoting women's legal rights through public awareness of the Benin Family Code and prohibiting sexual harassment. USAID/Benin has decided to use funds from its current program to keep WLR activities going through September 2007 as planned. This will maintain momentum going into the WJEI program, which is now being designed.

Women's Justice and Empowerment Initiative (WJEI). Current WJEI figures for the USAID portion of the program in Benin are USD 5.9 million over the three-year program. The DOJ portion of the 3-year program is about USD 3.9 million. WJEI activities for the USAID-managed components are now under design. A WJEI implementing partner for the USAID components is expected to be in place by

February 2007.

Child Trafficking. USAID manages a USD 1.2 million three-year grant with UNICEF, the leading donor agency working on this issue in Benin. In a program that emphasizes prevention, care and reintegration of victims of child trafficking and legislative reform, this grant enabled UNICEF to expand its program to northern Benin where child traffickers have become more active. This grant has also enabled UNICEF to undertake an ambitious household survey which will contribute to knowledge about the scope of the problem and contributing causes. USAID has funded USD 867,000 of the current UNICEF grant leaving an uncovered mortgage of USD 333,000. We have so far not been successful in identifying other funds for this program.

BROWN